

FROM COLLEGE TO FIRST-YEAR TEACHING

How the United States Compares to Several Other Countries

Up to one-third of new U.S. teachers leave the profession within the first few years, according to the recent report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. One reason for this "wastage" of teaching resources, according to the Commission, is our typical "sink-or-swim" attitude toward teacher induction.

In contrast, new teachers in some other countries are provided with resources and guidance that help them to make a successful transition from being students themselves to becoming self-confident, skilled professional teachers. The United States can learn from their experience. **The U.S. Department of Education** recently worked with the **Education Forum of APEC** (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and with Pelavin Research Institute to carry out a cross-national study of teacher induction practices. The report from this study, *From Students of Teaching to Teachers of Students*, includes case studies of teacher induction programs in Japan, New Zealand, and the Northern Territory of Australia.

These case studies show us that **teaching isn't any easier in other parts of the world. New teachers everywhere feel overwhelmed** by the challenge of their first year in charge of a class. One teacher in Australia's Northern Territory said: "It was like jumping in at the deep end. It is a very steep learning curve moving from the university to the real world." A teacher in Japan agreed, saying "This first year has been very difficult. I am much busier than I had expected to be. It is entirely different from my student teaching experience. Every day brings a new surprise."

Recognizing the challenge, these education systems have developed and put into practice strategies that help teachers through that very tough first year. **Some of the weakest aspects of typical induction practice in the United States have been addressed relatively successfully by these other systems. This report shows that "successful" teacher induction programs, while rooted in the unique cultures of the country where they are found, have the following characteristics in common:**

1. ***New teachers are viewed as professionals on a continuum, with increasing levels of experience and responsibility; novice teachers are not expected to do the same job as experienced teachers without significant support.***
 - In Japan and New Zealand, **new teachers are assigned to classes perceived as less difficult** or less critical to educational development, and they carry lighter teaching loads in order to participate in induction activities.
 - In New Zealand, one principal stated "I assign new teachers to classes where I expect fewer discipline problems and parents who are easier to deal with." Assignment to more difficult classes is phased in over a three-year period.

- In Japan, new teachers have reduced classroom hours and administrative duties.
- In all three of the programs studied, the authors concluded that **new teachers are viewed as professionals** -- albeit ones who are at a different point on a continuum of development from experienced teachers -- whose contributions will grow over time, given appropriate support. The difference in skill levels between new and experienced teachers are acknowledged and built in to the school program.

How different from the typical situation in the United States, where new teachers all too frequently get the most difficult class assignments, the most educationally needy children, and extra duties.

2. *New teachers are nurtured and not left to “flounder on their own;” interaction with other teachers is maximized.*

- In the three sites in the APEC study, **schools and classrooms are set up to maximize interaction among teachers**--between new and experienced teachers, and among new teachers. In New Zealand, for instance, the location of a new teacher’s class is viewed as important; when possible, it is next door to a “buddy teacher” or among other teachers of the same grade-level.
- **New and experienced teachers move frequently between one another’s classrooms** for visitations, observations, assessments, and advice. Both the students and the teachers are accustomed to this interaction, so it is not disruptive to the class nor confusing to the students. It’s a natural part of the day. The study calls this **“modeling good practice.”**
- In addition to observing and being observed, in these school systems interaction is facilitated by other structural components of induction programs. The school day or week includes **dedicated time for group planning, grade-level, and curriculum-development meetings, and team teaching.** These interactions help new teachers in planning, learning about and gaining access to resources, and building new relationships; they also let the beginner contribute to the group.
- In Japan, **new teachers are provided with at least two periods per week to be observed or to observe other teachers’ classes and at least three periods for consultations with guidance teachers.**

In the United States, by contrast, teachers are left to sink or swim. “Isolated behind classroom doors with little feedback or help, as many as 30 percent leave in the first few years, while others learn merely to cope rather than to teach well” (National Commission Report). The APEC study found that **attrition rates among new U.S. teachers are often five times higher than those of more experienced teachers.**

3. *Teacher induction is a purposive and valued activity.*

- The induction programs provide “just in time” activities. New teachers receive information and support when they need it, rather than in lengthy pre-term orientations. For example, in Chiba City, Japan, time is set aside throughout the year for first-year teachers to come together, learn, and reflect on topics that are likely to become important to them at about that time in the academic cycle. Teachers attend a workshop on preparing for teacher-parent consultations at a time just before the first consultations occur.
- In Japan, by law, new teachers must be provided with no less than **60 days** per year of in-school training (including observation and advice), under the leadership of the guidance teacher, and at least **30 days** of out-of school training per year.
- In New Zealand, the Advice and Guidance program provides release time equal to one day per week to spend on induction activities. For this purpose, schools with a new teacher are provided with 20 percent more than the cost of that teacher’s slot; most of that funding goes for release time so that the new teacher and/or guidance teacher can participate in observation, consultation, and in-service training; the new teacher has a strong say in how the time is used.
- In Australia’s Northern Territory, the induction program promotes teacher retention in a difficult and remote environment. “Orientation” actually includes three components: (1) four days of **initial orientation** before the term begins; (2) **“recall orientation,”** when new teachers come back together for three days about four to six weeks into the term; and (3) **on-going school-level support**. So, again, attention is given when and where it is really needed.

In much of the United States, on the other hand, to the extent that they get special training, new teachers tend to get pre-term orientations or other induction activities at moments chosen more for their convenience to organizers than to inductees’ needs.

4. *Schools possess a culture of shared responsibility and support, in which all or most of the school’s staff contributes to the development and nurturing of the new teacher.*

- In Japan, for instance, one of the principal’s duties is to ensure that all teachers in the school cooperate with the guidance teacher to help the first-year teacher.
- The frequent interaction between new and experienced teachers referred to earlier fosters a naturally close and supportive relationship that is extremely helpful to the first-year teacher.

- Most mentors in these three systems do not receive additional compensation, but having served as a mentor may be a criterion used for promotion to senior teacher or school-level administrator
- Sharing with mentors and other experienced teachers helps new teachers in all three countries cope with their initial, unrealistic expectations of themselves.

This support goes beyond the formal one-on-one mentoring relationship that is designed into teacher induction programs in many U.S. school systems.

5. *Finally, the study found that in all three countries, assessment of new teachers is down-played.* This does not mean that there is no attempt to “weed out” incompetent teachers. But the emphasis clearly is on helping new teachers to become better.

- In Australia/Northern Territory, for example, the administration asks schools to **focus less on administering assessments of teacher competency, and more on helping teachers prepare for assessment.** A teacher’s failure is seen as a failure on the part of the administration.
- The study researchers noted that the absence of serious concern by all participants in the induction program about meeting certification and registration requirements enhances the provision of assistance and support. Teachers do not seem to feel threatened or even uncomfortable about being observed, or about asking questions they fear will reveal professional inadequacies. **The frequent observation by fellow teachers is non-threatening assessment** that can help them improve.

This study found, however, that “teacher induction in the United States traditionally has focused most heavily on assessment; and assistance where it exists is strongly linked to aiding new teachers to achieve the assessment criteria.”

6. *Policy makers almost everywhere want to improve their teacher induction.*

Teacher induction is not perfect in any of these sites; in fact, all interviewed policy makers thought it could be improved. In all three sites, administrators at both **teacher-training institutions and in the schools say they want closer links with each other.** Formative and summative **program evaluation is virtually lacking,** so there is little hard evidence that the induction programs are working. And there is **some concern about equity:** teacher induction is seen to be more universally provided and more strongly supported in schools and communities with higher income levels. We also know there are some districts in the United States that are doing good things with their new teachers. ***Still, American schools could learn a lot about how they could better support their first-year teachers by taking a good look at what teacher induction means in Australia’s Northern Territory, Japan, and New Zealand.***